

# ABOUT SOME UNKNOWN ASPECTS OF IONA KHELASHVILI'S (1778-1837) LIFE AND WORK

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## Abstract

Great Georgian philosopher and theologian Iona Khelashvili (1778-1837) lived and worked in the period and epoch marked by very dramatic events for Georgia. Important aspects of the biography of this Georgian thinker have not been studied yet. The aim of the following article is to study and make as a subject of special discussion those stages and episodes of life of Iona Khelashvili which are unknown or need specification and further research. For this purpose, the author of the paper studied historical materials and documents kept in the Central State Historical Archive of Saint Petersburg that were unknown for researchers of Georgian philosophical thought so far. Based on the unknown materials and documents, the author revealed many important details, episodes and moments from Iona Khelashvili's life and work (one of the important findings is the establishment of the date of his birth).

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**Keywords:** Iona Khelashvili, Life, Work, Biography

## Introduction

Iona Khelashvili, a.k.a. Monk Iona, is one of the important representatives of Georgian philosophical theology. He lived and worked in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was the epoch marked by dramatic events for Georgia.

Located on the important geopolitical crossroad, the Georgian state, hoping for development after the lengthy and exhausting wars with Ottoman Empire and Iran, concluded the treaty of alliance known as "The Treaty of Georgievsk" with Russian Empire in 1783. Unfortunately, further events revealed that the hopes of Georgian political leaders were not realized. On the contrary, Georgian state disappeared from the world map at all. Based on the manifesto issued by Emperor Alexander I of Russia on September 12, 1801, the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti was abolished and on the basis of the same legislation it became the South province of the Russian Empire. For further strengthening of imperial policy in 1802, Paul Tsitsianov (Tsitsishvili, relative of the spouse of George XII, Queen Mariam) who served in Russia for a long time and had a Georgian origin was appointed as the Governor-General of Georgia. The Russified Georgian was quite acceptable and desirable candidate for the Russian Empire for implementation of imperial policy in Georgia (in Caucasus Tsitsianov earned the nickname "the formidable prince").

As Georgian princes did not wish to leave the homeland and it was difficult for the Governor-General to persuade them to move to Russia, he used force and in 1803-1805 exiled almost all of the members of royal family into the Russia. After using the force, Tsitsianov managed to win the favor of Georgian princes and former officials and nobles of Georgian kingdom with political tricks: by his advice, they received ranks in Russian Empire and were granted personal pensions. In addition to this, temporarily was renewed already

cancelled institute of the governors (*mouravi*), thereby reconciling the dissatisfied nobility as well. During the period of Tsitsianov's government, Russian laws were translated into Georgian. In addition to the implementation of Russian legislation, Russian administration in Georgia rudely interfered into the activities of the Georgian Church that revealed far-reaching imperial aims. In 1811, Russian Empire abolished autocephaly of the Georgian Church. In a very short period of time Georgia was annexed by Russian Empire and its Apostolic Church fell under the government of Russian Holy Synod and Ober-Procurator. Such is the period when Iona Khelashvili lived and worked.

Khelashvili is the author of dozens of works in which are given very important theological, philosophical, esthetical and literary views. He was the writer, researcher, philosopher, confessor to the house churches of children and grandchildren of Erekle II and tutor and mentor of many Georgian public figures.

Unfortunately, because of lack of biographical notes and documents, many aspects of Khelashvili's life are still unknown. The aim of the present paper is to discuss important stages of his life. In addition to the sources well known for researchers, documents kept in the Central State Historical Archive of Saint Petersburg were of particular importance.<sup>105</sup> As it was known that Khelashvili studied, lived and worked for years in Saint Petersburg (where he found his eternal rest), we supposed that in this archive we would have been able to find materials (historical, documentary, scientific or epistolary) related to unknown aspects of his life. In the course of the research, we were able to find very interesting materials regarding Khelashvili's biography. These materials were critically analyzed and compared to other documents. The author hopes that these findings will enrich our knowledge of Khelashvili's biography with new and interesting details.

### About the Date of Birth of Iona Khelashvili

There are different views regarding the date of birth of Iona Khelashvili (as about other details of his life which we will discuss later) that creates some kind of confusion. The researchers indicate several possible dates of birth (1772, 1775, and 1779). Because of lack of information, it was impossible to establish the exact date of birth (including day and month), but regarding the year of birth, the documents found in the Central State Historical Archive of Saint Petersburg were especially helpful.<sup>106</sup>

In the journal of Saint Petersburg Consistory, there is a very interesting and significant record dated back of September 17, 1812:

“We are requested to obtain information from the ipodeacon<sup>107</sup> [i. e. Iona Khelashvili] about his age and marital status.”

As it turned out, prerequisite of this record was Khelashvili's request to the Metropolitan Ambrose and the analogous request made by the Prince David regarding consecrating Iona as a monk. As a result of this request, on September 19, 1812 Georgian ipodeacon Ivane Khelaev (Russified version of Khelashvili's name and surname) was questioned in Saint Petersburg Consistory and detailed record about his origin, marital status, and education was made. According to the appropriate document:

“He, Khelaev, Georgian, was born in village Vakir of Tiflis province. His father Giorgi Khelaev who was the priest of the same village, is already dead, and Khelaev himself studied at Telavi school for five years where he studied the sciences taught there. He was not married, and he is 34 years old.”

From this record, it is clear that for September 19, 1812 when the questioning was held, according to his own testimony, Khelashvili was 34 years old. The questioning is

<sup>105</sup> (ЦГИА СПб Ф. Оп. 11. Д. 367).

<sup>106</sup> ЦГИА СПб Ф. Оп. 11. Д. 367, л.17-18.

<sup>107</sup> The ipodeacon is the highest rank of the small orders of the Church clergy.

confirmed by Khelashvili's personal signature of and accordingly, the date of his birth should be considered as 1778.

Famous French scientist, academician Marie Brosset considers 1772 as Khelashvili's date of birth, referring to the inscription on his gravestone. As it is known, Brosset carefully studied the epitaphs of Georgian gravestones in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and among them the inscription on Khelashvili's gravestone. Unfortunately, today the grave is considered as missing but in spite of this, we have the text of the inscription of the gravestone studied by Brosset which contains biographical data about Khelashvili. In this text, 1772 is indicated as Khelashvili's year of birth. It is unknown on what sources relied the author of this epitaph when indicating this date. Therefore, the text of the journal of consistory seems more reliable, because in it Khelashvili himself confirms his age, place of birth, origin, parents' names, conditions of education and childhood aspirations. So far there has not been obtained more convincing evidence which may support the other date. Hence, it is possible to assert that Iona Khelashvili was born in 1778.

### **Childhood, Adolescence and Early Years of Education**

Khelashvili's ancestors, whose surname was Mikhelashvili, moved from village Zemo Khodasheni to Vakir during the reign of Teimuraz II (1680-1762). In Vakir they changed their surname to Khelashvili. Iona, secular name Ioane, was born in village Vakir in Kiziki. He provides this information in his autobiographical work *Ronini* ("Wanderings") [7, 90].

Young Ioane was put under the tuition of the local church priest in Vakiri by the consent of his parents. "With my parents' consent I was given to the priest of the above mentioned church to study", wrote Khelashvili in his autobiography. He enjoyed being in church very much and worked there from sunrise until nightfall. He was keen to help the priest during divine service.

Khelashvili had a thirst for education from his adolescence and this feeling was so strong that he secretly left for Tbilisi without his parents' permission where, by God's will and by the help of kind people, he turned out in the palace of Erekle II. Iona worked as the servant of the chief Cook in the king's palace.

King Erekle put him under the patronage of his confessor and deacon of Metekhi Church Iese. The young boy was very successful in learning. He studied the Georgian alphabet (all three types: Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri, and Mkhedruli) and reading and writing in a very short period of time. During studying, he was informed that Laks (people who live in Caucasus Mountains and raided Georgian villages) killed his young father – Giorgi Khelashvili. This news made Iona very sad. It was then when he felt special responsibility for his family members, brothers and mother.

The sorrow for the father's death was complicated when Iona became ill with typhus. Because of this, he was forced to leave the king's palace. After recovery, Iona had to return home. Soon after that, mother became very ill and died together with her small son. The death of parents and sibling left Iona inconsolable.

As it is known from historical materials, after being defeated in the battle of Krtsanisi in 1795, King Erekle escaped to mountainous Mtiuleti. He returned to Tbilisi passing through Kakheti. In this period, he met young Iona in Kakheti. The old king again received Khelashvili and sent him to study in Bodbe Monastery to the Metropolitan Ioane. However, Khelashvili did not stay for a long time there because of scarcity of books in the church library. The only book he had was the Psalm received as the present from the king. Being thirsty for learning and quite purposeful, Iona again visited King Erekle in Telavi to ask him for help. King moved to pity and took orphaned brothers – Solomon, Grigol and Iona to the palace. Iona was put under the instruction of royal priest, scribe Ioane (Kalatozishvili). "By the order of his Majesty" Iona was allowed to use books from the king's chapel.

On January 11, 1798, Erekle II died. After the death of the caring king, Iona fell into the difficult situation: he had no books, no food, no appropriate clothing. In such a situation he addressed to Giorgi XII for help. The king sent the talented young man to Rector David (Aleksishvili) to Telavi Seminary who taught the young man “proper wisdom”. On December 18, 1800, Giorgi XII died. After this, Iona went to David Gareja Monastery.

Iona's story clearly reveals political decline and poverty of Georgia in the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. It also tells much about Khelashvili personality: in spite of poverty and continuous difficulties, only strong faith, commitment and great desire for receiving knowledge could have helped this young man not to give up to the difficulties and renounce his good intentions.

After visiting the monasteries of David Gareja and Shio-Mghvime approximately in 1802-1803, Iona settled in Natlismtsemlis Monastery in Kvatakhevi where he spent three years. It is likely that he became the novice there. I would like to pay more attention to this detail because various scholars assume that Iona was consecrated as a monk in Kvatakhevi<sup>108</sup>, which does not reflect the real case. It seems that the inscription on Khelashvili's gravestone studied by Brosset was not interpreted correctly. Below I cite the appropriate passage from the above-mentioned inscription:

“I was robed at the famous monastery in Kvatakhevi and I became the servant of holy monks who served there.”

This inscription means nothing more than that he became a novice (and not a monk). It is a generally known fact that there is the institute of novices at the monastery. By this, the one who wishes to become monk is examined during several years: after some period, he is being robed and becomes ipodeacon. *As a rule, the one serving as ipodeacon is not a monk but this is some kind of preparation for being a monk.* In Russian sources, Iona is mentioned as the ipodeacon. Therefore, as Khelashvili is mentioned as Georgian ipodeacon Ivan Khelaev in official documentary sources, and the story described in the autobiographical work *Ronini* (about being in Kvatakhevi for three years) as well as the fact of robing mentioned in the inscription of the gravestone are in accordance with one another, it can be concluded (as there are no contrary arguments) that *at Kvatakhevi monastery Iona Khelashvili became a novice and thereafter, he became the ipodeacon.* Iona was consecrated as a monk later in Russia.

In Kvatakhevi Monastery Iona had to live under hard conditions. He performed his service with belief, love of God and patience. The novice worked a lot, helped the needfuls in the neighbour villages and won the favor of many people, though his heart was thirsty for learning and so he was distressed by the lack of books.

At Kvatakhevi Monastery Iona learnt that by the order of Emperor Alexander, the members of the royal family were leaving for Saint Petersburg which brought him in desperation as the princes were his patrons. As a result, he decided to follow them to Russia.

### **From Tbilisi to Saint Petersburg**

In the beginning of April, 1805 Khelashvili followed prince Pharnaoz and his family to Russia. After the long travel, they reached Voronezh on May 31, 1805. In Voronezh, they stayed for a year. In this town Iona was hosted by eighty-year-old man Timote Borodin.

In 1806, by the order of the Emperor the royal family and their escort were allowed to continue the way to Moscow. Iona did not stay in Moscow and continued the way to Saint Petersburg.

<sup>108</sup> See K. Kekelidze, *History of Georgian Literature*, vol. 1, Tbilisi 1941. p. 370; G. Dedabrishvili, *Corpus of Georgian Epistolary Sources*, vol. 6. Tbilisi 2000, p. 5; T. Tseradze, *Iona Khelashvili (1775-1837)*, <http://www.qim.ge/iona%20xelashvili.html> (accessed 17 July, 2014).

### **At the Saint Petersburg Theological Seminary (Study of the Foundations of Philosophical Theology)**

In Saint Petersburg, closeness to the members of the Georgian royal family was great consolation for Iona. Catholicos Anton II, who was very attentive towards him, sent necessary books to Iona. Prince Ioane taught him ancient Greek and modern German philosophy and trained him in theology for three years. Prince David helped him a great deal to receive good education. He addressed with the request to the Emperor Alexander. The Emperor became interested with Khelashvili's personality and assigned his case to the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod.

In the materials of Saint Petersburg Consistory, there are documents which give detailed information about Khelashvili's education in Russia.

Alexander Nikolayevich Golitsin who served as Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod of Russian Orthodox Church in 1803-1816, addressed the Metropolitan of Saint Petersburg Ambrose by the letter on April 26, 1809:

"Georgian ipodeacon Khelaev came from Georgia and has desire to study at the theological seminary. His Majesty the Emperor ordered to present him to you and appoint the appropriate person who will examine Khelaev in order to find out in which college he is able to study; the study and living expenses would be given by the cabinet [Refers to the Emperor's cabinet]."

In addition to this, Ober-Procurator Golitsin requested from Metropolitan further information about expenses. From the resolution to this letter (26.04.1809) is revealed that it was ordered to present Khelashvili to the Rector of the Saint Petersburg Theological Seminary, Archimandrite Evgraph. The same day the Rector of the seminary Father Evgraph informed Metropolitan Ambrose in a written form:

"Georgian ipodeacon Khelaev sent by your holiness for examination of his knowledge has shown some knowledge in philosophy and theology and can do far more if he beforehand acquires the ability of thinking and explaining even in Russian as he does not master basic scientific languages. Though, he understands Russian but speaks with difficulties and mistakes."

Metropolitan Ambrose (Podobedov) allowed Iona to live in the dormitory of low classes in order to acquire better Russian. Khelashvili was also allowed to attend lectures in the elementary class to study Russian grammar. In addition to this, he attended theology lectures.

On May 7, 1809, Khelashvili enrolled at Saint Petersburg Theological Seminary. After three years, on March 5, 1812, Iona graduated seminary which is certified by the copy of the following document:

#### **Certificate**

Georgian ipodeacon Ivan Khelaev studied at the Seminary at Saint Petersburg Russian reading and writing, dogmatic and moral theology, church history, Russian grammar, philosophy and arithmetic, with quite good marks, always behaved honestly.

March 15, 1812.

The original is signed by:

Rector Archimandrite Anatol

Inspector Archimandrite Method

Priest Petre Turchaninov

Secretary Andrei Ivanov

Ivan Khelaev [personal signature with block letters]

## Iona Khelashvili's Life and Work in Russia

Literary life was flourishing in Saint Petersburg in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Literary circles and salons were widespread in the capital of Russian Empire. Georgians also established their literary salon. The representatives of this circle were mainly princes: David and Ioane, Grigol, Mirian, Pharnaoz, Ilia, Okropir and Teimuraz. Iona Khelashvili also was a member of Georgian literary salon in Saint Petersburg. He was respected for his intellect, knowledge and experience [3]. What respect he received is seen from eulogy in a form of iambus which was dedicated to Iona by princes Teimuraz and Mirian, Petre Laghidze and Solomon Razmadze. Iona's services and knowledge was described by Ioane Batonishvili in his work "Kalmasoba" (1813-1828) in which he presented Khelashvili as the literary character.

Georgian monk known for his knowledge and honesty became a confessor of Georgian colony (royal princes, queens and other nobles). Khelashvili served at the house church of queen Ana for three years and later went to the house church of Prince Teimuraz where he served until 1824. From this period until death, Iona served at the house church of Queen Mariam. The monk known for his honesty, wisdom and devotion was much respected among the members of royal family and he always tried to plant peace and love among the members of Georgian colony.

The toiler monk separated from the homeland still cared for the prosperity of Georgia: "I work day and night in order to multiply writings in Georgian language. I wish that one day schools were filled with pupils" – said he in one of his sermons [6]. He also dreamt of that time when "publishing houses will start to publish books [...] then Georgia will blossom and become the second Athens." In autobiographical work *Ronini* and also in various church sermons and private letters he often referred to political and social issues concerning Georgia and considered that the lack of proper system of education was one of the main reasons which played a significant role in the downfall of the country [7].

During his life in Saint Petersburg Iona supported Georgians who came to study in Russia. That he cared for and materially supported young Georgians visiting Russia is confirmed by many letters which he received in Saint Petersburg. In these letters young people asked him for help and guidance.

Khelashvili played a great role in the education of Georgian philosopher and logician Solomon Dodashvili (1805-1836), whom he called "son". By the help of Iona, Dodashvili enrolled at the University of Saint Petersburg. Khelashvili did his best to help the talented apprentice to master the science.

In the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire in 1801, Iona saw the fall of the "Christian Bagratons' house".<sup>109</sup> In his sermons dated from 1810-1820, he expressed extreme pessimism regarding "the downfall of the country". However, later in 1830s, his position became different. "You are a small nation and cannot defend yourself without the patron" – such was his address to his homeland. At that time, Khelashvili's views underwent metamorphosis and he estimated Russo-Georgian relations in a new light. Unfortunately, this line of thought was supported by many Georgians living in Russia, who saw the perspectives of economic, political and cultural development of Georgia in the unity with Russia. Because of this, Iona did not sympathize the conspiracy of Georgian nobles in 1832.

"Philosopher's wealth is service to God" – admonished Iona his apprentice Dodashvili and advised him to give important place to theology in his philosophy. He himself dedicated all his conscious life to development of his own and others' intellectual abilities in addition to serving to God.

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<sup>109</sup> Bagrationi - royal dynasty that ruled Georgia from the Middle Ages until the early 19th century.

During his activity in Saint Petersburg Iona created more than forty literary works, wrote numerous philosophical, theological and pedagogical papers. His sermons and personal letters are also of great importance because in them one can find not only important views about contemporary social life in Russia but also wealthy materials about life and work of many outstanding Georgian persons of that period.

God as the leading force of history; homeland and the reasons of its decline, necessity of education, protection of purity of Georgian language, freedom, faith, ethics, morals, patriotism – these are the issues and themes which permeate Khelashvili's work and epistolary heritage.

Some of the notable works by Khelashvili include "Book of thirty-four questions", "Tripartite of theology", and "Book of the Wedding of Orthodox Christians". Especially interesting is "Georgian Dictionary" written by Iona on which he worked for 10 years.

The honoured monk passed away in 1837 during the work at his writing desk [6].

## Conclusion

Iona Khelashvili dedicated all his life to the development of Georgian culture. The young man's thirst for gaining knowledge underwent difficult life full with obstacles. Raised in the small Georgian village, he continually struggled to overcome difficulties with his diligence and persistence. As a result, at the end of his life, he was greatly respected among Georgians living in Russia. In addition to this, Khelashvili patronized and materially supported young Georgians who came to study in Saint Petersburg. As it was noted above, many aspects of life and work of Khelashvili remain unknown. Therefore, further research of the creative life of this many-sided person is of great importance. There is no doubt that such research will shed the light on the development of theology and philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgian thought.

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